

Heart-Healthy Program Impacts Faith-Based Communities

Issue

In the Lowcountry of South Carolina, you don't have to look far to find a person who has been personally touched by heart disease or stroke. The statistics in our state are staggering, especially for the disparate African-American population:

- During 2006, 2,526 African Americans died from heart disease in South Carolina; and
- African Americans face higher risks of developing ischemic heart disease and suffer stroke deaths more often than do Whites. These higher illness rates result in 10 years of lost life for African Americans in our state, and a stroke mortality rate that was 18 percent higher than the national average in 2005.

Intervention

In the late summer of 2008, a local coalition, with guidance from the S.C. Department of Health and Environmental Control's (DHEC) Public Health Region 8, coordinated a comprehensive program to improve the lives of those in the community. This program, *Soulfully Fit*, is a faith-based program designed to help communities lower the risk of heart disease and other contributing chronic conditions. Among other things, the program includes:

- *Search Your Heart*, which helps educate and raise awareness of the heart-health disparities among African Americans and provide them with some insight how to live a heart-healthier lifestyle; and
- *Power To End Stroke*, an education and awareness campaign targeted for African Americans which promotes signs and symptoms as well as risk factors for stroke.

This program also includes components for diabetes awareness and smoking cessation. The *Soulfully Fit* program would not have been able to make the impact it has if not for the grant monies to support this project from DHEC's Heart Disease and Stroke Prevention Division, as well as other partners.

Impact

The response to *Soulfully Fit* among the faith-based communities has been exceptional. There has been high attendance at both the general and planning meetings, as well as the trainings that have been scheduled in both Beaufort and Jasper counties:

- At the introduction kick-off that was held in November 2008, 23 people were in attendance, representing 11 churches in Beaufort County;
- Each of the faith-based communities signed a contract to secure their commitment in the program;
- All of the 11 churches who attended the kick-off were trained in January and February 2009;
- A total of 14 churches have signed contracts and will have *Power To End Stroke*, *Search Your Heart*, and diabetes and smoking cessation trainings in their churches within the next year; and
- In Jasper County, all 14 churches held a *Red Dress Sunday* to promote heart awareness in February and March 2009.

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